



UN General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem 2016: Operational recommendations from the United Kingdom

Introduction

This contribution to preparations for the Special Session outcome document should be read alongside the contribution of the European Union and its Member States, with which the United Kingdom aligns itself fully. Our intention here is not to provide a comprehensive overview of topics for the outcome document. Instead, this paper will highlight select areas where experience from the United Kingdom can enhance the global response.

The UN General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem 2016 presents a unique opportunity for all Member States, civil society and international organisations to enhance the global response to drugs.

The United Kingdom is delivering a modern, balanced and evidence-based drug strategy within the framework of the UN drug conventions and our wider international obligations.

Our approach strikes an effective balance between demand and supply reduction. This includes holistic prevention work, comprehensive support to promote recovery, and proportionate, smart action to restrict supply. All of this work is underpinned by a respect for human rights, a cross-cutting and fundamental principle which must form the basis of any response.

There are positive signs that our approach is working. There has been a long-term downward trend in drug use in the United Kingdom, and more people are recovering from drug dependency now than in 2009/10.

The Special Session is a rare chance to harness the collective expertise of all partners in promoting public health and minimising drug harms. The UN drug conventions and other international instruments, including international human rights law, provide a robust framework for this work. A productive Special Session will be one which focuses on practical measures to strengthen the global response, and provides a constructive basis for discussions on a refreshed international plan in 2019.

It is essential that civil society and international organisations are able contribute their considerable expertise to the Special Session. The Special Session segment at the 58th meeting of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in March 2015 was exemplary in this regard, with civil society and international organisations sitting on discussion panels in the plenary and making substantial contributions from the floor. Member States must continue to be ambitious in championing the valuable contribution these partners can make.

The areas which the United Kingdom's contribution will cover are:

1. Meeting the Challenge of New Psychoactive Substances
2. Smart Criminal Justice
3. Promoting Full Recovery
4. Relentlessly Pursuing Organised Crime
5. Holistic Prevention
6. Accessing Essential Medicines

1. Meeting the Challenge of New Psychoactive Substances

New psychoactive substances are the key emerging drug challenge the international community faces. The dynamic market in these substances presents particular difficulties in tackling their public health harms, such as acute toxicity and dependence. Meeting this challenge will require concerted action to implement balanced, evidence-based responses at both national and international levels. The United Kingdom is working with partners to implement a long-term plan to adapt the international system to meet this challenge. Significant progress has been made in recent years, but there is more to be done.

International action

The international scheduling system

- a) Data: Member States and international organisations should continue collecting and sharing information to build our collective understanding of new psychoactive substances. This includes supporting the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Early Warning Advisory, sharing analytical data to assist with forensic identification, and building our knowledge base of the health harms of these substances, including acute toxicity and dependence.
- b) Prioritisation: The World Health Organisation, with support from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and other partners, should continue to prioritise the review of the most prevalent, persistent and harmful new psychoactive substances, with public health harms the key factor considered.
- c) Assessment: The World Health Organisation should continue to conduct independent, evidence-based assessments. Conducting regular assessments helps the international community to keep pace with the dynamic market in new psychoactive substances.
- d) Control: Through close and early dialogue with the World Health Organisation, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs can then make informed scheduling decisions, bringing the most dangerous substances under control while not disproportionately impacting legitimate use, including the availability of essential medicines.

Cross-border law enforcement

- e) As with other drugs, the international trade in new psychoactive substances requires a cross-border law enforcement response. The International Narcotics Control Board's New Psychoactive Substance Taskforce should be supported and developed, as it provides a helpful forum for this work. We should consider ways to further strengthen our response, including enhanced cooperation on intercepting packages in the post and fast parcel networks.

National action

- f) Member States are encouraged to establish national early warning systems to collect forensic and public health data, and to monitor domestic developments in the new psychoactive substances market. These are essential for building a rich understanding of the threat, informing national demand and supply reduction work, and feeding into the international picture.
- g) Effective treatment and prevention responses to new psychoactive substances bear both similarities and differences to those used for other drugs. While many of the central principles are the same, these substances also require a tailored approach. Member States are encouraged to build on existing knowledge to develop robust treatment and prevention policies. This should include tailored interventions in settings such as prisons and schools. Lessons learnt should be shared to support similar efforts elsewhere. The United Kingdom has learning to share from Project NEPTUNE, which has developed tailored guidelines and tools to support clinicians to identify and treat the harms of new psychoactive substances.
- h) Developed policy exchange is also important concerning national legislative and law enforcement responses. It is only through sharing our learning on the various approaches taken internationally that we can better understand the most effective ways to tackle this threat.

2. Smart Criminal Justice

A smart criminal justice system requires a targeted, proportionate approach at each stage of the process. This should include measures to prevent drug-related crime, proportionate enforcement options for police and the courts, and high quality treatment for dependent offenders.

- a) Member States should ensure that police officers are integrated with local communities. Building trust with communities helps to fight many crime types, including drug crime, and can prevent crime occurring in the first place.
- b) Interventions targeted at gangs and youth violence can be an effective way of addressing this threat. A balanced response combines tough sanctions for offending gang members with preventative measures, such as supporting potential gang members to enter employment, training or education. Interventions should be developed by bringing together analysts, researchers and delivery partners to coordinate a joint approach.
- c) Law enforcement and the courts should have a variety of options for dealing with low level offenders. These are likely to be most effective when focused on constructive behaviour change, such as requiring an offender to undertake work to support their local community. Clear guidelines can help to ensure consistency and proportionality in sentencing without undermining operational or judicial independence.

- d) Member States are encouraged to forge strong links between criminal justice and health systems. This will help dependent offenders to get the support they need. Access to treatment is the right of every individual, and will also reduce the chances of reoffending. This should include establishing systems to identify and support people with mental health, substance misuse and other vulnerabilities when they first come into contact with the police and criminal justice system.
- e) Prisons should serve the dual goals of punishment and rehabilitation. To deliver the latter, high quality drug treatment in prisons is essential. This is good for both the individual and society, and should continue uninterrupted as people pass from prison into the community.

3. Promoting Recovery

Recovery requires a variety of treatment options, tailored to individual circumstances, with wider support services such as housing and employment. This helps drug users to reintegrate, and reduces the crime associated with drug use. Universal access to interventions which reduce the risks of drug use protects users as they move towards recovery, and help us to make progress in the global efforts to address HIV/AIDS and other blood-borne diseases.

- a) To achieve lasting recovery, support for dependent drug users must move beyond measures to tackle dependence. Secure housing, fulfilling employment and strong social networks are some of the surest routes to lasting recovery. Member States are urged to take a full spectrum approach to recovery by integrating these services with existing treatment measures, including for drug users being released from prison.
- b) Measures such as opioid substitution treatment, clean needle exchange, distributing foil to injecting drug users (which facilitates the smoking of drugs to reduce injecting), and distributing naloxone to counter opioid overdoses protect individuals from many risks associated with drug use. These tools should be used as part of structured efforts to get individuals into treatment and towards recovery.
- c) This package of measures to reduce the risks associated with drug use, as set out in the joint WHO/UNODC/UNAIDS technical guidance¹, are a vital part of the global work to address HIV/AIDS and other blood-borne diseases. Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, the international community must work to ensure HIV/AIDS ceases to be the public health emergency it has remained in too many places for too long.

¹ http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/idu/targets_universal_access/en/

4. Relentlessly Pursuing Organised Crime

The international community should adopt a comprehensive approach to serious and organised crime. This involves strengthening the enforcement responses to criminality and addressing the vulnerabilities that drive, enable and perpetuate it.

- a) A comprehensive approach must include promoting the economic growth that helps vulnerable people (to prevent those people being drawn into drug trafficking), efforts to engender a culture of lawfulness (where the population follows the law and turns to the justice system to address grievances), and ensuring an effective role for civil society in measures to enhance crime prevention and criminal justice.
- b) Enforcement activity should focus less on targeting commodities and more on disrupting the organised criminal networks that traffic drugs, including through attacking criminal finances.
- c) Assessment of the impact of activity to tackle serious and organised crime upstream should reflect our comprehensive approach. Historically, international efforts at monitoring the impact of interventions have often focused on metrics that highlighted achievements in supply and demand reduction: seizures of illicit commodities, number of arrests, and consumption levels. This remains important but there is value in broadening our assessment to include metrics that reflect a holistic response: social and economic development in affected communities, and underlying conditions such as poverty and insecurity
- d) The UK believes that the death penalty is wrong in all circumstances and should be opposed as a matter of principle. In the particular context of drug offences, capital punishment contravenes UN safeguards which stipulate that the death penalty should only be used for the “most serious crimes”. Some countries use of the death penalty also restricts international efforts to combat drug trafficking by limiting law enforcement cooperation and other support which may lead to executions.

5. Holistic Prevention

Holistic prevention means taking a whole-life approach to helping people resist drug use. Confidence, resilience and self-esteem are some of the key faculties required for this. The primary focus of prevention work should be on strengthening these qualities in young or vulnerable people.

- a) Member States are encouraged to implement evidence-based programmes to build young or vulnerable people's resilience and empower them to make positive choices about their health. Such approaches impact drug use and a range of other dangerous behaviours, such as risky sexual activity and engaging in crime.
- b) Where communications campaigns are used, these should be carefully targeted towards 'at risk' groups. This will ensure maximum positive impact, while avoiding unintended consequences such as publicising drugs to non-users.

6. Accessing Essential Medicines

The international community must continue to strive to widen access to essential medicines. It is unacceptable that 5.5 billion people live in countries with inadequate access to these medicines. The World Health Organisation states that equitable access to 'medical products, vaccines and technologies' is one of the six building blocks required to establish strong health systems, which are necessary to achieve positive health outcomes. There are a range of market and government failures that inhibit access to essential medicines. These arise at different stages of the complex supply chain that takes a medicine from the research laboratory to the end user. We must strengthen efforts to make material progress here, in accordance with the roadmap set by the Sustainable Development Goals.

- a) The international community should emphasise that efforts to address drug abuse need not and should not be at the expense of access to safe, effective and affordable essential medicines for all.
- b) Relevant international organisations (including the International Narcotics Control Board, the World Health Organisation, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and the UN Development Programme) are encouraged to take joint, comprehensive action to enhance the global access to essential medicines.
- c) Member States are encouraged to continue to work with each other, international organisations and civil society to share best practice in enhancing access to essential medicines.